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Changes in Higher Education: Interviewing Dr. Charles Sullivan

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Jeromy Nelson

Dr. Newstreet

History of American Education

March 10, 2016

Changes in Higher Education: Interviewing Dr. Sullivan

1 JN: This is Jeromy Nelson, and I am interviewing Dr. Sullivan at the University of Dallas. Dr.

2 Sullivan, When did you start teaching?

3

4 DS: I started teaching in 1981. I was at Columbia University in New York City at the time, and I
5 began to be what's called a preceptor and what is also called contemporary civilization, which is
6 the Columbia University core curriculum. Columbia's core Curriculum really is the foundational
7 core curriculum throughout the country, Chicago developed its own somewhat later, but
8 Columbia's was the one that really started things off just after the First World War I taught at
9 Columbia for four years, really 1981 to about 1986 there were some years I was in Europe, so I
10 was off and I wasn't a preceptor. Then I also taught at NYU in their core curriculum, and that
11 overlapped my time in Columbia, then extended it a little bit beyond it. In 1988, I came to the
12 University of Dallas, and I have been at the University of Dallas where I am sitting right now. I
13 have been teaching here, I guess that's now almost twenty-eight years right, some crazy number
14 like that. For a very very long time I have been at the University of Dallas. In between I taught at
15 other places, I taught for some time at Reed College in Portland, OR. So, I was on leave from the
16 University of Dallas and went there to teach. Reed also has a really really good core curriculum,
17 in my opinion perhaps the best that I have ever encountered next to Columbia's. University of
18 Dallas's core curriculum is good, but I do think there are other ways to do it that might be more

19 optimal. Then I have also taught at the University of Texas of Dallas, and I have taught at, over
20 the past four years I have taught or three years I have taught at Southern Methodist University.
21 So that is my teaching you know CV.

22

23 JN: Awesome. What was school like when you started teaching?

24

25 DS: Well I started teaching at Columbia, and I was in a very very very kind of selective
26 environment, and I was also in a very selective kind of curriculum, which is the contemporary
27 civilization curriculum. I had essentially sections of about twenty students sometimes eighteen
28 sometimes it might have crept up to twenty-two, but never beyond that and often times it was
29 really around seventeen to eighteen, which is really optimal for a seminar kind of course. Then
30 when I started teaching courses it was in the 1980s, early 1980s, and so you know there were
31 basically chalkboards. We had seminar tables, the styles of the time and the music of the time.
32 Most of the students I taught, I am actually in touch with some of those students. I taught at
33 Columbia, so their now, what, their thirty years older, so you know their kids are now grown too.
34 I was very much of the same age as many of the students I was teaching, so it was a kind of
35 peculiar experience, but it really was seminar table and chalkboard, and of course now of days
36 it's not seminar table and chalkboard, and the class size I had was very small. So, those are some
37 of the things that were probably most salient at that time.

38

39 JN: OK! How have the students changed since you started teaching?

40

41 DS: That's a really interesting question. I was beginning to kind of move into that, so I wanted to
42 set up that question. For example, I began to teach at Columbia, the students there of course
43 their there because they can afford to be there, so they came from a very very privileged
44 background. Quite a number of my students were from the New York City area, Long Island,
45 Connecticut, New York State. Many of them were well to do. Quite a few them had a Jewish
46 ethic or a Jewish religious background. I would have to say, I mean, I loved these first classes,
47 these were really good classes. I'm thinking back to my time at Columbia, and I don't believe I
48 had in my classes at Columbia, I don't believe I ever had a person of Hispanic background, and I
49 cannot recall having a person of an African American background in my classes. So, let's just say
50 and take this in the right way, it was very White and very elite White. Now when I went to teach
51 at NYU it was different. NYU there the core curriculum in which I taught was really a core
52 curriculum designed to get students who would not ordinarily go to college to be prepared for
53 college, and that was a very very different clientele or very very different student bodies, so there
54 were people who had Asian background, there were people who had African American
55 background, there were people very very very modest economic circumstances, and really just
56 struggling to sort of stay into NYU and think that NYU could be where they would end up. So,
57 that was a very very different experience, of course when I first came to the University of Dallas
58 this school tends to remain is somewhat homogenous population of students as well, which you
59 did not initially see a lot of minority participation. Now it being a catholic school, there was
60 always a greater percentage of students at the University of Dallas who had a Hispanic
61 background, and coming to Texas there was almost automatically a lot less students who had a
62 Jewish background. So, but one of the things that has certainly has changed, with the students
63 since I have started teaching is the complexity of the ethnic mix. Even at the University of

64 Dallas, there are many more Hispanic students here. The University tries to get more African
65 American students to come here. There is certainly a greater Asian population. Now I have
66 encountered East Asian students along the way getting here, but then when I taught at Reed, of
67 course, I encountered East Asian students, but I think that maybe one of the things that also is
68 happening there are more students from South Asia, from India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, places like
69 that, that is more prominent. Of course there are some Muslim students now at the University of
70 Dallas, who are obviously Muslim and what they would choose to wear. So, that has all changed,
71 so the ethnic makeup is really quite remarkably different. Now there are also changes in mores,
72 and I don't know that you want me to get to those or?

73

74 JN: Sure. Yes. Definitely!

75

76 DS: I mean, when I first started teaching, of course a lot of it was chalkboards and taking notes
77 in notebooks, and you would write notes down and you know things of that nature. I mean some
78 of mores that have changed change with our technology. So, students are more likely to have a
79 computer in class, a laptop computer. They are more likely to use their phone to look up things in
80 class, which I don't mind, as long as they are using it that purpose. I would say that probably the
81 attention span for students has shrunk in this time. Their willingness to be distracted probably is
82 somewhat greater. I think the thing that I think that has changed maybe the most, and this I think
83 is not a happy change. The technology has been cut both ways. There are both positive and there
84 are negative. The thing is really kind of odd about teaching especially now 2014, 2015, 2016 is
85 when I first started teaching students would actually be interested in other student's opinions.
86 There were much more willingness to discuss, and both on student evaluations, which I see is

87 chair for other faculty members, but also my own, and just in the terms of the dynamic of my
88 class there is really a kind of odd process where students really don't care what their peers think.
89 They just don't have any interest in they make it very manifest that they are not interest in the
90 exchange of ideas in the classroom, and I think that is probably a profoundly negative
91 development because it's really, I think, when I think about education, I think about education in
92 terms of developing one's voice. One's voice in terms of one's own character. What do I stand
93 for? What am I willing to speak up for? But also one's voice as a citizen. What do I care about
94 enough to vote for? And when you don't respect others voices and you don't really care to
95 exercise your own, something really profoundly wrong is happening within some of the
96 situations I see in higher education. I think students should be more willing to understand that the
97 intangible development of voice is a real net good, and if they don't exercise it now, if they move
98 on to a corporate world, they will never exercise it.

99

100 JN: Interesting. So, you were talking about the students. Now, how has the teaching style
101 changed since you started teaching, since the students have changed?

102

103 DS: The teaching style also has changed. So, for example in my classes now in Western Civ 2 or
104 1, like I just out of a class Science Technology and society, which is supposed to be all
105 discussion, and it is sometimes hard to get anyone to discuss anything about issues that are the
106 most pressing in our time. One of the things that I do much more than I ever use to do is that I
107 have student presentation. I essentially force students to have to present a reading, and both be
108 able to give an accurate exposition of the reading, but also to raise questions about the reading
109 that they think are significant. So, I essentially force the issue about voice. Now, that is not

110 something that is usually welcomed by students, many of them deeply dislike it, but that is what
111 I am called to do and so that is what I am going to be doing. So, that's a difference. In terms of
112 teaching style, in classes that are more lecture based or information based, there what has also
113 changed is I make an awful a lot of use of technology. I like learning management systems,
114 being them Blackboard or ECollege or canvas or any number or learning management systems. I
115 think it is an economical way to give students outlines for classes, which I have always done. I
116 always did outlines from the beginning. I use to write them on the board with chalk and now I
117 present them kind of electronically with a projector and a screen, but I always do outlines. So, I
118 like to use more technology, and I think that's an important change, and in general I personally
119 think the use of technology, except for the distractions it can sometimes purpose, is a real net
120 positive in higher education. I like learning using management systems, and I sometimes find it
121 deplorable that more of my colleagues are kind of dismissive of them. I think they really do help,
122 especially for students who have kind of, you know, complex needs. It provides a way that they
123 can have access to the course twenty-four seven. So, I think that's the thing, two things that have
124 changed the most, more technology and more insistence that students actually talk in class. Now,
125 that's the teaching style, there are other things that I have personally done. Do you want me to go
126 into those?

127

128 JN: Yes, definitely.

129

130 DS: For example, when I first started teaching I was, most young student teachers are like this, I
131 was much more aggressive in what I, ambitious in what I aspired to do in class. I think some of
132 my first classes were probably really really really great classes, in terms what I aspired to do and

133 how I integrated things. I was just telling somebody the other day about when I first came to
134 University of Dallas, I actually, you can put extra things into the Western Civ curriculum if you
135 wished, and when I started out here I decided I wouldn't do some work on Spinoza. I didn't know
136 much about Spinoza, other than what I had read second hand, and I wanted to do some reading
137 on Spinoza, so I did, and I still think that was really just a brilliant choice. I think I used The
138 Theological Political Treatise, and it was really really, it's a short work, but it's also a really
139 brilliant work. So, I was much more willing to do those kinds of things earlier on. I've gotten
140 much less ambitious, and part reading mores is of decline. People are not as willing to read much
141 as they maybe they once were, or they think they can get a kind of economical, you know kind of
142 a way of outflanking the ruling reading when they get tired and they begin to sleep and stuff like
143 that, it happens to me too. They get it by saying, "Well Wikipedia will tell me what this book
144 says, and that is good enough." So, the more, which it is not good enough because only by
145 engaging the text as it is kind of in its integrity do you realize some of these podded kinds of
146 things, they don't really work very well and they are not very good. And only by that way do you
147 get the ideas to be used by yourself, but people are less likely to read and I am less likely to
148 assign reading. Now, I typically, in most of my classes, I assign what I consider the bare
149 minimum for a college class. So, that's how my style has changed, and of course I am much more
150 open to things like groups. I'm much more open to things like presentations than perhaps I once
151 was. I use a lot more images in class because I have the learning management systems to use
152 them. I am liable to use things like YouTube videos, if they are short. I use a lot more of that
153 kind of stuff, so that is how my teaching style has changed as well.

154

155 JN: Okay. All right, so what was the curriculum like when you started teaching and how has it
156 changed?

157

158 DS: I taught a very particular curriculum for a long time. When I first started teaching courses I
159 taught in core curriculum courses, and so my first three positions were all within a rigorous core
160 curriculum. And the Columbia core curriculum is probably for most students unbelievable
161 rigorous. So, for example in the contemporary civilization in the first semester we start off in the
162 first week we read all of Plato's republic. The second week we read past tense all of Aristotle's
163 politics. And it goes on like that all the way through the eighteenth century. So, when we get to
164 the seventeenth century toward the end of the course we are reading all of Hobbs's Leviathan, in
165 a week. All of Lock's Two Treaties, in a week. So, it is a very very rigorous curriculum.

166 Probably not a curriculum most people could handle. The same is true at Reed College when I
167 taught there. Now the Reed College is different because Reed mixed up philosophical text with
168 literary text. So, I taught in what they called the Humanities curriculum at Reed and I taught in
169 early modern Humanities there. And so we would read Cervantes for example and they read
170 Cervantes, they don't read selections from Don Quiote, they read Don Quiote. We read very
171 widely in Monti's essays, which is vaguely both philosophical and literary, but we read things
172 like Rob Lea. We read things like Shakespeare along other things like Luther, Calvin, and early
173 modern political thought. So, it was a very different curriculum, but in any case very rigorous.

174 Even when I came to the University of Dallas the curriculum is little bit less intense in terms of
175 the comparison to Reed or the comparison to Columbia, more like when I taught at NYU, New
176 York University. And there that curriculum has been very stable over the entire time I have been
177 at the University of Dallas. It is little bit less reading intense, we do five core text or six core text

178 and not one a week, and they are much much shorter than things like Hobbs's Leviathan. They
179 are things like Luis the Thirteenth's Rerum Nevarum. Or there is things like Ally Gazelle's
180 Knight or many students have already read or encountered some along the line in secondary
181 school, so they are shorter. And we read much more in terms of selection, so I don't assign all of
182 Berk's Reflections, nor do I assign all of Calvin's Institutes. I assign what I think are the good
183 bits, the selections. So it is a little bit less intense, but the University of Dallas curriculum is
184 largely been unchanged in my entire time at the University of Dallas. The Western Civ
185 curriculum has had, to my knowledge, no changes. We read parts of Thucydides, parts of Lyvi,
186 we read parts of Boethius, we read Emhart's Life of Charlemagne, and then we read Thomas
187 Moor's Utopia, and that is probably book that I assign the entirety of because it is the only book
188 without sections, so it very difficult to assign pages in that book, and students have different
189 copies of that book and you can't assign pages if they have different editions. Same thing for
190 Western Civ 2 where there has been one change or two changes I can think of now. When I first
191 came to the University of Dallas we were reading Voltari's Letter's to England, which is not a
192 bad text, but it is very superficial in my opinion. And largely due to my insistence we change to
193 Kant's philosophical essays. So we read essays like What is Enlightenment, Idea of the Universal
194 History, Speculative Beginning of Human History. We read those kinds of essays from Kant
195 rather than Voltari, Voltari's Letters to England. And the second change, and again this is largely
196 due to me being a pain for my colleagues. we use to have a requirement that we read a twentieth
197 century text and that is all it was. So the last text we have to read in the semester was Leo the
198 Thirteenth's Rerum Nevarum and the core curriculum specified you need to read one twentieth
199 century text. And over the years I had used text like Fredrick van Higher Road to Serfdom. I
200 used Cheslimoiph's book Captive Mind, and at one point I think I used Fraud's Civilization in its

201 Discontent. And these were all twentieth century text that I used, and what eventually seemed to
202 me right is it does seem that as you look back the Holocaust and the show as a central event in
203 the twentieth century as totalitarianism generally was such a central event. So we have now moved to
204 a specified twentieth century text which is Eddie's ... Knight. Those are two of the changes, but
205 that said substituting Kant for Voltari and specifying a twentieth century text in some ways make
206 the curriculum more conservative than it was when I first came because we now have a very
207 much more clear common experience for all of the students. So those are how the curriculum has
208 changed in the core course and most of my teaching tends to be in the core course. In terms of a
209 broader curriculum at the University of Dallas where I have spent most of my teaching life, the
210 curriculum has changed in general what I do and what the department does, I do a lot more
211 History of Science than what I use to do, so I do a course on History of Science and even in the
212 catalog we have Scientific Revolution as a course and I do much more work, and we now have a
213 concentration in the History and Philosophy of Science. And I also do a lot more work in the
214 Human Science and we have a Human Science Department now. So for example the Science
215 Technology and Society course I am now teaching is not in the History Department it is in the
216 Human Sciences Department. So in terms of the University of Dallas's curriculum I think they
217 have made two really nice additions in the time I have been here and that would be the History
218 and Philosophy of Science and the Human Science curriculum. There is much more
219 interdisciplinary kinds of work you can do in these two areas. So those are ways the curriculum
220 has changed. There are other curricula changes that happen at the University of Dallas, there has
221 been changes in the Language program, but they are relatively modest I suppose. We have had
222 on and off again a Computer Science program, it is now on again, but it was on before but was
223 wound up. We have more Business students now because we have a Business program when we

224 first came to the University of Dallas there was no Business program per say here. There was a
225 five year through plan so you could major in English or History or Psychology and then take
226 some Business courses in the graduate school of management and then kind of get your MBA in
227 the fifth year, but now we have an undergraduate Business major so that's a pretty significant
228 change as well. Those are the primary was in which the curriculum has changed.

229

230 JN: Okay. Going back to the first you were saying you were a preceptor. Can you explain?

231

232 DS: Preceptor is just a fancy title that Columbia gives to people who lead there contemporary
233 civilization courses. It comes out of the English system of Universities. it basically your there to
234 be there as a mentor and mediatory as students work their way through these classic texts. It's
235 just a fancy title. preceptors were paid rather well so perhaps the title gives them a greater claim
236 on the University's resources and preceptor's were not just graduate students as I was, I was
237 finishing up my PH.D. at the time. Preceptors are also regular faculty. So it is a very preciduous
238 position for a graduate student to be sitting beside a major world philosopher somebody that
239 everybody has heard of and then be teaching that same exact course. So it was really kind of nice
240 that I got to do that. I am eternally grateful that is probably were I was educated was preparing
241 classes for the Columbia contemporary civilization curriculum because it forced you to be up to
242 date with scholarship across from Plato to all the way through whatever we were doing towards
243 the end and that changed as we went through, but I had to be up to date with Hedger scholarship
244 and Victistin scholarship alongside with Aristotle scholarship and Hobbs's and Lock's
245 scholarship and I had to be able to talk about these things intelligently because I had great
246 students but we also had weekly meetings where we talk with each other about how do you teach

247 Victistin's Uncertainty. I don't know. I am just a poor graduate student writing on political
248 economy. I know how to teach Adam Smith, but Victistin maybe I am not so sure about and so
249 we had to do that, so that is were probably I got educated. So the preceptor kind of was a title
250 that was meant to get at that unique situation and unique status.

251

252 JN: Interesting. Thank you. What are some of the changes outside of school that have made
253 teaching easier or more difficult?

254

255 DS: The developments in technology generally outside the classroom have made, there ways that
256 it has made it more difficult because people are more distractible and they are on a different time
257 rhythm than perhaps they once were. so I have already alluded to those types of issues. I think
258 technology has made teaching easier I would say on average because you can use things such as
259 images in class, or if I wanted to use an image especially a color image I would have to go to a
260 color printer and that cost a fortune back in the 80s and 90s and many times what I was reduced
261 to was carrying some art book around with me, which weighed a ton. so there were silly things,
262 which now I don't have to worry about at all. I have been teaching for a long time, so a lot of my
263 stuff is still in paper form, but more and more my course are on flash drives. so that I have
264 images on flash drives. I have documents on flash drives. I have outlines and reading guides on
265 flash drives. I have everything I need. I can fit a three, four, and five courses and all the history
266 of those course on essentially one flash drive. I think technology on average is really kind of
267 made it more portable and they have more variety in them. so I think those changes are really
268 quit good and quit stunning. so there is that. other changes outside the school that have made
269 teaching easier or more difficult of course are the general economics of the time. I think

270 generally on average this has made teaching in my particular discipline, which is history,
271 probably more difficult. I began to teach in the 1980s and in the 1980s there was a long period of
272 prosperity in the early 1980s. then the stock market major correction in 1987. then things came
273 out of that. then there were various financial crisis in the 1990s and of course the dot com crisis
274 in of course 2008. the increases kind of rhythm of crisis and prosperity has made a lot more
275 people, righty I say, anxious about why I am doing what I am doing and what is this, how is it
276 going to improve my bottom line and my security in the future. now that is something everybody
277 should ask themselves in higher education. we are not in an aristocratic society, at least most of
278 us aren't, where we can say, "I want to go off to Oxford and Cambridge and I want to finish
279 myself and I want to do a grand tour of Europe and maybe now a grand tour of Asia, to see the
280 world and to deepen myself as a human being." more and more people basically have to say,
281 "How is it going to improve my prospects for promotion and my job security in the future." and
282 more and more students, it seems to me, are struggling with issues like debt. so they are more
283 likely to have students' loads and then trying to mitigate those student loans by working as
284 students, so they are distracted by their work schedules. all of these types of things has changed.
285 it has probably has made the educational experience less relaxed in a way, and when I say that I
286 am thinking of someone like Joseph Piper, who talked about leisure as the basis for civilization.
287 when I was doing my education preparing for contemporary civilization, it wasn't impossible to
288 sit and maybe to go to central park and to sit outside and to read let's say the Second Treaties of
289 Government by John Lock and to sit there and to be quiet and you could see students on
290 campuses doing it. one of the things that strikes me is my children have just gone through
291 college. one of the things that strikes me about contemporary campuses is it wasn't like the
292 campuses I went to. when I went to school, first of all things like the students' center were

293 always filled with noise and students and people sitting around. and even when I taught at
294 Columbia people would sit in the inner mall at Columbia up at the one-sixteenth street off of
295 Broadway and there would be thousands of kids they were reading, they were talking, they were
296 just hanging out, there was much more exchange of ideas, but you see that less and less at the
297 University of Dallas, there is less of that. My daughter went to Cal Tech and she is now at
298 Georgia Tech. my son went to Austin College at the University of Tulsa. College campuses are
299 kind of off puttingly quiet on the weekend and off puttingly quiet during the week, and I think it
300 is because a lot of students are working and a lot of students are trying to make some money and
301 a lot of students are in their rooms saying, "where is the internship that will be my ticket to a
302 good job post-graduation." so I think that has made teaching much more difficult because
303 students do have less time and instructors need to be aware of that. and I think also when you are
304 in the humanities you need to be clear it is nice to read Shakespeare, it is nice to read Jane
305 Austin, but you need to be able to answer the question, "why do this? How is it going to improve
306 my bottom line?" it can't just be you're a better person. you also have to be a better person, yes,
307 but a better person with a job. that's important. those are the two sets of changes: technological
308 and economical that I would want to focus on.

309

310 JN: All right. and how is the assessment of students changed, if it has?

311

312 DS: ...in external ways it is still very much the same. A, B, C, D, and maybe the occasional F, I
313 don't know. and of course if you prefer the number system, I use both. I line them up so there is
314 the 100 point scale. so at some level it is the same. so you have to acknowledge that and in terms
315 of my own grade distributions I don't see a whole lot of grade distribution. I know people are

316 concerned a lot about grade inflation and I am aware there is grade inflation, I can see it in
317 colleagues grades as they shift over time they are more likely to buy themselves some time by
318 giving somewhat higher grades. I think probably I do that too, but not I think significantly. I
319 think I still give Cs. I still give the occasional D. I will give a F now and then if a student goes
320 missing for example like that. I know my own grades have inflated, but not in any kind of
321 fundamentally statistically significant sense. so I think that there is great inflation, but it is more
322 of an individual basis within the University of Dallas and it is probably is more different schools
323 have different expectations as well. I think at the University of Dallas the students here are more
324 conservative backgrounds, so they are more willing to accept a lower grade because there is
325 deference to authority. that may not be the same elsewhere for example if you go to Ovarium or
326 a Slumore and you are paying 70,000 dollars a year, you kind of think I deserve the B, I'm here,
327 I'm paying. there may be more that there, I don't know, I can't speak to that with any authority. I
328 think in terms of assessment of students changing I mean I do different things. I do presentation
329 and I do fewer papers because I think over time I thought of papers as an undergraduate core
330 classes they are kind of busy work. what's if mean to say go out and research something in
331 western civ and some student will do something on Luis the XIV and another student will do
332 something on Sara Burnhart or Emily Painhurst and somebody will write about some weapon
333 system they really think is cool. it really just seems a lot of busy and make work to make. I don't
334 do papers anymore, where I use to think it was mandatory and required. fundamentally I think
335 that is a good idea. I just don't see assigning papers for the sake of saying, "Students need to go
336 to the library to learn research skills." No, I think they can learn research skills on writing on
337 something they want to write on, so when they are in an elective, I am all for papers because they
338 have chosen that class, they are saying I have an interest in that class and so let's engage that

339 interest and figure out how to research for sake of an interest, not for the sake of an assignment.
340 so I think in terms of assessment the kinds of assignments I am giving are different. I more test
341 based in core classes. and of course I have research papers in electives and I have more in a way
342 of presentations in my electives. another way assessments have changed, I think students... with
343 the changes outside of campus life. they are more concerned about grades than perhaps there
344 was. there is more grade anxiety than there use to be. now here at the University of Dallas what I
345 said is true there is deference to authority, so when you give a C they don't complain, but you can
346 feel that students are more attentive to assessment than they once have been. I need this gpa to
347 get into law school. I need this gps to get into medical school. I can't possibly get into my
348 business school of my choice if my gpa is less than this number. so there is a little bit more of
349 concern with numbers and quantification in assessment. as a university as a whole everybody is
350 constantly assessing the assessments. there is numbers and numbers and numbers. I think
351 assessment of the assessment if really a foolish waste of time. it is distracting teachers from
352 teaching. having them create all sorts of matrixes which in my experience very few teachers go
353 back to because in general if they got one presentation, two tests and one paper, they are pretty
354 comfortable that system works and they are usually pretty much right. the assessments that they
355 give to somebody like me a chair to pass on will always vindicate their choices, so it is not like
356 they are passionately stepping back from their assessments and saying I might actually test this.
357 No, they basically give self-confirming evidence. so there is that issue with assessment too the
358 increase pressure to assess the assessments, but in terms of what is happening on the ground I
359 would say that students are more anxious. me for example, my assessments have shifted to match
360 what I said to about shifting trends in higher education.
361

362 JN: okay. in your opinion what has changed the most since you started teaching?

363

364 DS: what has changed the most? that is kind of hard to say. I thought about this question quite a

365 lot. I mean the most obvious external change is the technology. I have a computer on my desk. I

366 have been watching some movies back in the 70s and 80s and realized that not everybody had a

367 home computer in these kinds of movies and when you go back to watch these things and you

368 look at phones and phone technology, so I think in some ways the biggest physical change is the

369 change in technology, the apparatus. in terms of changed the most and I am thinking of some of

370 the stuff I do for SMU. what has changed the most over time is and this is not entirely based on

371 evidence in the University of Dallas, but from a broader world, is probably the complexion of the

372 students from their diversity. basically when I started teaching it was a white privileged audience

373 and it is not so much that anymore and that pretty much changed. the economic differentiation is

374 greater. the ethnic differentiation is greater. if 1983 had kept on and never changed, kind of like a

375 Groundhog Day scenario, would I have ever encountered a student from India? probably not. not

376 from New York City, not there, but now these are some of the highest performing students that

377 you encounter in school, colleges, and universities. I think something that has changed along

378 with diversity, and this is less in terms of the equipment and more in terms of audience. I think

379 another thing I should mention is that when I first started teaching probably the majority of the

380 high performers were males. I think it is quite striking that in most classes I am teaching now the

381 higher performing students are women. now maybe the highest performing student might be a

382 male, but the next three highest performing students are all females. or maybe the second highest

383 performing student is male, but three of the top four are females. that is really pretty striking. so I

384 think the diversity both gender diversity and ethnic diversity is probably the other change I
385 would single out as being the most important shift, in my experience as a teacher.

386

387 JN: and what has changed the least since you started teaching?

388

389 DS: what has changed the least since I started teaching? this is probably a really tenuous thing to
390 talk about, but I can remember going into my very first class at Columbia. it was in 1981. I was
391 very very young at the time although I was older than most of my graduate students because I
392 had another career before considering going into graduate school, but I looked young at the time.
393 I walked into my class and I put down a briefcase that I had and I sat down at the head of the
394 table. the students almost in one voice said, "You can't sit there, that's for the instructor." and I
395 said to them, "I am the instructor." that was a really really special class. I am friends with several
396 people who were in that class and they are now in their 40s and 50s and they have kids who are
397 going to college now. so it is a kind of strange thing to have kept in touch with them, or kind of
398 unusual thing to have kept in touch with them, but I remember that because they were just kind
399 of, there was a sort of innocence is not the right word, but a certain earnestness I think is the
400 better word. they kind of engaged education in a way of process of discovery and process of
401 unfolding who they were, their character, their values, their hopeful contributions to the world in
402 which they would live. I think that fundamentally stays the same. you go into a classes today and
403 sometimes you have dud classes. the class doesn't like you and you learn very quickly to not like
404 the class. that is something every teacher encounters. there are some classes with certain
405 personalities, but in your best classes you are still going to go in and you are still going to have
406 this immediate report because both you, as the instructor, and the class is kind of in this process

407 of discovery, trying to figure stuff out, trying to make connections about things that are
408 important, just curious about stuff. so I think that fundamental kind of desire, that human desire
409 to be curious and to know and to discover and to unpack. that is at least something I have been
410 fortunate to have across the entire range of my career.

411

412 JN: Awesome. what are some of the difficulties or struggles you have faced since you started
413 teaching?

414

415 DS: the next two questions are really, they are kind of connected. I will divide them up in two
416 ways. I will answer 10 in one way and 11 in another way. some of the struggles I face have to do
417 with me as a teacher. I have been a teacher now since 1981, so we are talking here about how
418 many years, that's like 35 years. that's a long time and of course I am approaching the end of my
419 career and I am aware of that and there will be a new generation behind me who will do some of
420 the same things and have perhaps similar experiences and different experiences, but sometimes
421 as a teacher one of the things that is hard is controlling your own expectations and your own
422 mood, to remember that you were once young and sometimes you were distracted. you were
423 once young and you sometimes you pulled all-nighter and were tired in class. sometimes you
424 were once young and you were having a bad day and just felt kind of trellis. that's hard because
425 sometimes as a teacher you look out and things are changing and maybe somethings you had a
426 deep and abiding interest your students don't have a deep and abiding interest in and they really
427 couldn't care less and you think what's it all mean. so I think that struggle or difficulty one has as
428 a teacher is most immediate to me is how to keep your moral up. how to keep that sense of
429 discovery, that sense of playfulness, that sense of vitality? How to keep it going? because it is

430 not always easy. in different classes your gonna have people who rub you the wrong way, you're
431 a human being and you are going to rub people the wrong way and you have to realize that well
432 some people are just not going to like you and you still have to work through it, okay. you gotta
433 make the best class you can make. you gotta be as fair as you can in the assessment of the
434 students and you just gotta make it work somehow. but sometimes you go home and you say to
435 yourself and this is being recorded, so I won't say what you say to yourself, but you say oh I
436 blew that class, I really should have gone a different way. you gotta be able to pick yourself up
437 and continue. that's probably I think the most potent, the most immediate, ongoing challenge and
438 ongoing struggle that I as a teacher have and I faced it from the very get go and I face it today. I
439 always want to do the very best I can do. sometimes I have a class, I just, we don't just get along,
440 me and the class. the students' personalities and their expectations don't match what it is I think I
441 am supposed to be teaching and this happens a lot when you have a core curriculum. you gotta
442 teach classes that some students just don't care about at all and they are just doing it because they
443 enrolled in the school and they gotta do it to get a degree, but you gotta pick yourself up and go
444 in everyday you gotta be excited. sometimes it's like an actor, you gotta go on stage and you
445 gotta do the act every single time. maybe you are just sick of the role, but you gotta go out and
446 do it. so that is an important personal challenge and struggle every teacher will have to face.

447

448

449 JN: I think you addressed it...

450

451 DS: because I have something for that...

452

453 JN: definitely!

454

455 DS: I think higher education is becoming way way way way way too much metric driven. I think
456 there are things you should measure. I was originally, when I first went to college as a very
457 young person, I was originally a mathematics major and I worked for years as a statistician. I
458 understand exactly that you want data for things in economics. I was an import export analyst for
459 the US bureau of Money. I understand all that, it helps to understand what is going on, it helps
460 knowing what the price is and what the price could be and things stuff like that. sometimes when
461 you have a learning objective like: understands the complexity...a number cannot be put to that
462 and that is more of a qualitative and more recognizing one student gets it and another student
463 doesn't get it and you can't really say they get it because they used the following six words in this
464 particular order. so you measure twelve of my fourteen students did it and the other two hence I
465 have this particular percentage. some of that is foolish and I think there is way too much concern
466 with metrics that are quantified and some things in education are just going to have to be
467 qualitative. it is the way parents teach their kids. sometimes they know they kids getting it and
468 they are learning to behave in public, they are excited about this vacation or that. you don't say,
469 "well Johnny were you 49% happy with the vacation to Colorado." you get a feeling and some
470 things I think have to be left up to feeling. we are not robots. I think feeling, intuition, and some
471 of these qualitative understandings of what is going on, they are open to arbitrariness there is
472 no doubt about it, but I think they are really important to get the educational process right. some
473 of it is about what do I feel. does this student really understand? what do I feel about this class;
474 did it really work in some kind of casual and interesting way that I can't put down in numbers? so
475 I kind of think some of the challenges in teaching higher education today is the obsession with

476 turning everything into a quantitative measure. I would say it has gone too far and qualitative
477 measure needs to take their place alongside quantitative.

478

479 JN: is there anything else that you want to say or add to any of these questions?

480

481 DS: I am here for you.

482

483 JN: then I done. thank you for everything. this is so enlightening.

484

485 DS: Jeromy, I really appreciate having you in class. you were a great person in class. I am

486 honored that you asked me and if I could ever help you personally again, I would do it in a

487 heartbeat.

488

489 JN: Thank you very much.

I interviewed Dr. Sullivan on March 3, 2016 at 11:00 am in his office at the University of Dallas. I asked him 11 questions and they were:

1. When did you start teaching?
2. What was school like when you started teaching?
3. How have the students changed since you started teaching?
4. How has the teaching style changed since you started teaching?
5. What was the curriculum like when you started teaching? How has it changed?

6. What are some of the changes outside of school that have made teaching easier or more difficult?
7. How has the assessment of students changed?
8. What has changed the most since you started teaching?
9. What has changed the least since you started teaching?
10. What are some of the difficulties or struggles you have faced since you started teaching?
11. What are some of the challenges you have faced in teaching higher education?

Summary:

First Dr. Sullivan talked about where he started teaching, which was at Columbia College from 1981-1986. He went to New York shortly after, and he was there until 1988 where he continued his teaching at the University of Dallas up to the present day. Next, Dr. Sullivan talked about how the schools had chalkboards, the students were the same ages as they are today, seminar tables, and really how schools were similar as they are today with a few modifications in technology. He told me how students use to be more white elite while at the Columbia College, but at NYU he had a more diverse student population. UD has a more “homogenous” population, but is becoming more and more diverse with the Muslim and Asian populations coming in to UD (58). He talks about how students now have laptops and phones, and they have a “willingness to be distracted” (81). When he first started teaching, he explained how “students were more interested in other student’s opinions, but now students don’t care what their peers think” (88). He is also concerned that students don’t have a voice and this can affect them as a citizen when they grow up and now is the time to figure out their “voice as a citizen” (93). Dr. Sullivan says it is hard to get students to discuss, so he has students do more presentations in order to talk. He also says students are not willing to read the material as the use to. He explains how the

curriculum at Columbia is more intense than UD and he teaches different classes than he use to like History of Science, History and Philosophy of Science, and there are more business programs and a business major that is offered at UD. Dr. Sullivan told me what a preceptor was, which is a fancy title for professor at Columbia University. He says that technology has made teaching easier because images and flash drives make teaching more “portable” (267).

Economically, students are in debt, which makes students less engaged and more focused on working outside of class and always wondering how the class relates to them. He says students are more concerned with grades than they used to. When I asked how the assessment of students has changed he says he gives fewer papers in the core classrooms because it is busy work and he only does papers in electives where students are actually interested in researching a topic. He explains that there is a more focus on assessing the assessment and it is foolish as well because it is “distracting teachers from teaching” and it basically is self-confirming evidence for teachers (351-357). Dr. Sullivan says technology has changed the most externally, but internally student diversity and gender diversity has changed the most. He says there is more diverse ethnic population than there has been in the past. He also says the males were the highest performing students in the classroom, but now it is the females that are out performing the males. Dr. Sullivan says the thing that has changed the least is “the human desire to be curious and to know and to discover and to unpack” (408-409). The biggest struggle he faces is the moral of the teacher. He says you, “gotta pick yourself up and go in everyday you gotta be excited” (443-444). He also explains at the very end that he feels Universities are becoming more number driven and more quantitative, but he feels that teachers need to be able to assess qualitatively as well because they know the students and how they performed over all. He feels we should be able to do both assessing quantitatively and qualitatively.

Reflection:

While I interviewed Dr. Sullivan, I heard two things that really stuck out to me the most that related to what we have talked about in class. The first one is how today students do not have a voice or opinion in the class, and they are more hesitant to discuss or talk in class than in the past. Dr. Sullivan explains that this can cause the students to not have a “voice as a citizen” (93). Thomas Jefferson wanted the school system to aid in educating the public so they can become better citizens in this new and changing world. However, now it seems that this dream is failing and students voice their opinions very well in class or read the required text to become educated citizens. The other thing I noticed while interviewing Dr. Sullivan is that he brought up students are having to work to either pay for college loans, earn money to eat and have shelter, or both. It reminds me of when we talked about the Industrial Revolution and how the students either stopped at a certain grade to go to work, went to work right after school, or did not go to school at all because they had to earn money to support the family. Students are getting distracted on what is truly important and I know we need money to survive and get educated, but we should focus on the true value of a good education.